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# Communicating for Wholeness

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One pursuing the etymology of "heal" in *Webster's Dictionary* is told, "more at whole." Both words share a common origin through an old English word, "hal," meaning whole. Recent writing in the area of wholistic medicine has served to remind us once again of the basic unity of the human person. The conscious realization of this unity, which is a goal more than a given, continually eludes us. This is true not only in our theoretical and academic considerations but even more so in the experienced reality of our lives. Yet we know, if only from fleeting moments, that experiences which bring us the awareness of our own togetherness are healing, growthful and health-enhancing.

The quality of our communication, both with ourselves and with others is critical in our pursuit of health and wholeness. Its manifest relationship on the one hand, to our sense of belonging and well-being, and on the other to our experience of isolation and frustration, requires that all in the health care fields periodically reflect on the quality of communication available through their professional services and institutions.

If communication can contribute to growth, it is clear that disturbed communication can lead to illness, emotional as well as physical. A child deprived of an environment which encourages and rewards speech easily becomes communicatively impaired. Protracted anger and guilt responses, unresolved by open communication and unrelieved by sharing, can lead to many physical illnesses. These range from headaches and ulcers to hypertension and its many destructive consequences. The quality of our communication is an essential factor in the achievement of our goal of being fully functioning persons.

"Peak experiences" is a phrase which Abraham Maslow used to describe those times of our lives when we are experiencing ourselves as fully functioning. The qualities of a person enjoying such an experience are described by Maslow.

The person in the peak experience usually feels himself to be at the peak of his powers, using all his capacities at the best and the fullest. In Rogers' nice phrase, he feels "fully functioning." He feels more intelligent, more perceptive, wittier, stronger, or more graceful than at other times. He is at his best, at concert pitch, at the top of his form. This is not only felt subjectively but can be seen by the observer. He is no longer wasting effort fighting and restraining himself; muscles are no longer fighting muscles. In the normal situation, part of our capacities are used for action, and part are wasted on restraining these same capacities. Now there is no waste; the totality of the capacities can be used for action. He becomes like a river without dams.<sup>1</sup>

"A river without dams" suggests unimpeded flow with access to forward movement. Applied to a person, this image suggests one alive and growing through the seasons of one's life. Human growth occurs only by contact and relationships. It is integrated and organic. It is not isolated or atomistic. Communication is the relational process which generates this growth.

At the heart of this process of communication is the act of perception, the uniquely personal act by which one apprehends one's world, the entire spectrum of one's experience. It is not "things as they are" which elicit reactions from us; it is rather "things as we see them." If, while driving, I mistake a ball of tumbleweed blowing across the highway for a small animal, the swerving and jerking of the car and passengers are just as *real* as if a small animal had wandered into the road. On a more complex level the cognitive, emotional and physical dimensions of my perception of a cow on the crowded street of Calcutta will differ vastly from that of a pious Hindu.

Perception then is uniquely personal. Yet this is the point of entry for experience which forms the potential base for sharing and growth through communication. Integral to the process of perception, the matrix through which it occurs, is our symbol system. The symbols, images and meanings available to us are indeed the constitutive lens through which we apprehend the world around us. Symbols or images which are capable of focusing and interrelating portions of our experience can aid us in our growth and integration. Limited or overly impoverished symbols or images will block our ability to assimilate and integrate our experience.

An example might help here. Eskimos are known to have many words for snow. These words, with fine shades of meaning, enable them to distinguish for functional, vital purposes, many kinds of snow. The availability of a rich symbol system enables them to bring into clear focus this segment of their environment and relate it efficiently to their various needs for transportation, building igloos and survival in general. They interact with this portion of their reality in a highly discriminating and productive manner. We are predisposed to perceive as we do in no small way by the images and symbols of the culture in which we live.

Let us move these reflections a little closer to home. A similar process is at work as we move through the experience of a human lifetime. The manifold phenomena which we encounter are potential for self-enrichment and self-enhancement. The condition for deriving this possibility from our experience is the availability to us of sufficiently open and pertinent symbols and images. Once again, an example may help. A middle-aged woman whose image of "good person" excludes feelings and experiences of sexuality will be considerably handicapped and disadvantaged in her relationship to this dimension of human reality. Learning and growth through an expanded awareness of her bodily presence and emotional interrelationships with others will be severely curtailed. Carl Rogers describes this situation very well:

Psychological maladjustment exists when the organism denies to awareness significant sensory and visceral experiences, which consequently are not symbolized and organized into the gestalt of the self-structure. When this situation exists there is a basic or potential psychological tension.<sup>2</sup>

Parts of ourself or our experience which remain unintegrated are potential sources of tension, illness and stunted growth. What we cannot imagine or symbolize for ourselves we cannot assimilate, learn from or integrate. The process of integration or the journey toward wholeness, however, requires assistance. Growth, of necessity, means encountering new experiences and the development of new images and understandings of oneself. Certainly this is true of a change in something so personal to us as our health. To be able to explore, question, and finally accept such changes requires from the environment understanding and encouragement. It also requires a supportive community with a vision of life sufficiently whole and a vitality sufficiently confident that it can help the person imagine life anew after a threatening and possibly debilitating change.

The correlative of a rich and sufficiently open series of symbols or images for our grasping and reception of reality is a network of communication systems sufficiently *operative* for expression commensurate with the experiences received. We know the satisfaction and delightful sense of relaxed completion which attends the adequate articulation of our experience. Such communication brings momentary closure because it objectifies our experience at least at one level and allows us to move on to further exploration.

This process is clarified by Church.<sup>3</sup> "Until our thoughts have been formulated symbolically they are only elusive feelings and impulses to action, once we have said them, no matter how imperfectly, we have objectified and externalized them and can work with them." This articulation of our experience is essential for effective and efficient marshalling of our energies for goal-oriented behavior. However, our goals constantly vary. It is the nature of the human being to be in process. The inability to alter and shift goals leads to fixity or per-

severation in inappropriate behavior. Essential to adequate growth toward wholeness is an understanding of self and experiences through symbols and images which are structured sufficiently to enable identification, but sufficiently undefined to allow the preservation of the individuality of each person's experience. Part of the inspiration of the Gospel writers lies in the image of Jesus which they present. It is sufficiently identifiable that men and women of all ages have been able to resonate with His life experience. It is sufficiently universal that this has been possible without the believers' denial of their own idiosyncratic personal and cultural experience. The exceptions to this are evidence for the point at issue. When the Gospel has been over-defined and westernized, the acceptance of Christianity did necessitate an alienation from the believer's indigenous roots.

This relation of wholeness and growth to openness in our ideas and images used in self-understanding and self-expression is well explicated by Tauber and Green.

The generative idea is not closed, not repetitive, nor inhibitive of expression and change. More positively, it is what we call a genuine expression of a human individual — a genuine communication of his experience. And perhaps what makes such an expression, such a communication, both genuine and generative is the wholeness of the individual's involvement in the communication. The entire experience of this person is at one with the expression, with the symbolic form; and this wholeness of engagement and of continuity is also the openness of the individual to growth and expansion.<sup>4</sup>

If such wholeness and satisfaction are possible in our communication, why is it that communication problems abound and that satisfying communication seems such a rare commodity? The vast numbers of mentally ill, psychosomatically and emotionally distressed are ample evidence of this scarcity.

There are some fallacies which sometimes color our understanding of the process of communication. Two distortions are worthy of reflection. Our love of literacy has made us very "word-centered" people, equating and, as far as our perception is concerned, often limiting communication to what is said or written. Misunderstanding also occurs when we think of communication as essentially a process involving a transmission from one individual to another. One writer balances these distortions with enviable verbal economy. "Man is a regulated multi-sensory station in a transmission system, a multi-channel interactor."<sup>5</sup> This is simply to remind us that much more than words shape the effects of our communication.

The need for an awareness of the many dimensions operative in our communication is well stated by Tauber and Green:

A great deal of what we do among one another consists in apprehending non-propositional emotional responses and reacting to them. Most interpersonal interaction, in fact, goes on in the prelogical mode. We are constantly negating prelogical processes and converting them unwittingly into logical syntactical propositions, with a consequent falsification of security and communication.<sup>6</sup>

Communication, then, to be satisfying and helpful must connect with and acknowledge the affective and highly personal meanings of those involved. For Carl Rogers, empathy (feeling with) and congruence (honest articulation of relevant feelings) are essential characteristics of the helping relationship.

The "interactions in the prelogical mode" mentioned above include all those unarticulated messages we receive non-verbally from the totality of our environment, the transmission system of which we are a part. This includes everything from our use of time, clothing, and space to body posture, eye contact, gestures and interpersonal distance. It includes also the architecture of our buildings, the color scheme and the pictures and images which surround us. A hurried pace which says, "I am busy," a demeanor and facial expression which says, "I am an authority and answer man," a conversation or monologue controlled only for "facts," walls bereft of a variety of human images, bodily proximity without caring touching — these are messages which impede communication and undercut the security necessary to facilitate it. These are only a sampling of the many channels through which we are inundated with messages which will have their impact on the final quality of our communication. That final quality can foster health and wholeness or it can stunt and paralyze it.

With time, patience and skill these channels can be utilized and ever more effectively orchestrated to enable us to share more and more of who we are. This wholeness in our communication is surely a *sine qua non* goal for Christian and Catholic health facilities. The message of the Incarnation, after all, is that all we are from the top of our heads to the tip of our toes is meant for salvation (healing) and new life. The message of the Resurrection is that all the seasons of our life and the passages involved therein, the wholeness of our humanity, can be revelatory of new life. Our pursuit of wholeness now is simply the other side of the coin of our belief in the Resurrection of the body then.

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